

TAGVVERK

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Banu Cennetoğlu at SculptureCenter

I almost missed it: a photo of two white men sandwiched between an advertisement for Turkish rugs and the latest soccer score. One man sports a red fedora and red tee; the other has glasses and a shirt boasting the Creative Commons logo. The two stand in front of a laptop adorned with stickers. Squinting, I make out stickers that read *I <3 the Internet* and *FIGHT FOR YOUR DIGITAL RIGHTS!* effacing the Apple logo. The only German word I decipher in the accompanying caption translates as “journalists.” Next to the image is an unusually frigid weather report, suggesting that I am a time-traveler gawking at the anachronism, making sense of the misinformation before me.

The clipping is part of a 142-volume bound compilation of all newspapers published in a country in a single day—in this case, (11.08.2015) in *Wolfsburger Allgemeine*. The newspaper project features prominently in Banu Cennetoğlu’s solo exhibition at the SculptureCenter, with a devoted reading room set up for the viewer-time-traveler. The volumes vary in size and scale depending on the country, but their methodology is clear: no single viewer can comprehend the work in its entirety. Instead, what one encounters is a particularity—a happenstance relationship between text and image (the journalists I spotted occupy a tiny speck of the German compilation, glanced over entirely by chance.) The optical clash is at times glossily banal (German Creative Commons advocates), at times painfully foundational (disproportionate numbers of scantily clad femmes across time and space). The encounter is mystifying, opening onto a greater theme embedded in the exhibition: information overload and the kind of looking that accompanies it.

The newspapers become a single image, prompting a viewer to adopt an ethnographic type of looking. A story is woven in the margins, the negative space between bylines, and the offbeat advertisements aggressively spliced into them. Images become the indexical traces of what once happened in the world, including detritus ordinarily left out—rubbish, spam, hyperbole. Flipping through a large quantity of the compilations sees certain themes emerge. The unsurprising indulgence of sexist base tropes; malicious advertising strategies based on racial profiling; political cartoons with remarkably violent imagery—the tropes are possible to see when looking en masse. The patchwork of images frozen in time read as cinematic stills, while the subtended text performs the role of resuscitation, quietly animating them. Newspaper-as-viewing-apparatus through which to see many worldly sectors—advertising, headlines, weather, scores, solicitation—as interrelated.



Installation view, Banu Cennetoglu, SculptureCenter, New York, 2019. Photo: Kyle Knodell

The leather-bound volumes which make up the newspaper project pay homage to the existing depth of information left unprocessed. Some countries are better represented than others; together, they allude to the breadth of international coverage and the fact of its distribution. They are the negative space of the encounter, the spam cast aside of the spectacular newscycle. The classic hierarchy of information is evacuated by the sex workers, Turkish rug advertisements, off-cycle weather reports, and German journalists. The volumes hardly account for five cubic square feet, and yet, they are inexhaustible. The combined visitation history of viewers of the exhibition would still not be enough to piece together the entirety of its contents.

Cennetoglu's other works play with this triangulation of forces—artwork, archive, and indexicality. At the heart of the exhibition is a colossal work occupying most of the gallery space, consisting of the artist's entire personal archive. Entitled *1 January 1970 – 21 March 2018 · H O W B E I T · Guilty feet have got no rhythm · Keçiboyunuz · AS IS · MurMur · I measure every grief I meet · Taq u Raq · A piercing Comfort it affords · Stitch · Made in Fall · Yes. But. We had a golden heart. · One day soon I'm gonna tell the moon about the crying game* (2018), the work is an unedited stream of data. Playing on a 128-hour loop—again, impossible to view in one-sitting—*Yes. But. We had a golden heart* (the titles comprising the work are interchangeable with one another) moves through film, video, and stills (and in doing so informally indexes the history of visual recording devices in the 2000s.) Watching the archive is similar to the experience of leafing through the newspaper volumes. It is possible to encounter a long loop of children's toys belonging to the artist's daughter or a violent clash between police in riot gear and protestors, but it is unclear where in the five-day loop either stands.

The possibility of a forceful juxtaposition presents itself again, absorbing two unrelated images into one overarching look. Perhaps the disorientation is intentional—more akin to the experience of actualized violence and the way in which it disenfranchises its enemies. The difference here, of course, is in positionality: there is no comparing the voyeurism of an exhibition with a body at real risk. A viewer stands at a remove from the violence on display, literally and figuratively (the projection requires a good deal of distance to get into view). Discomfort ushers forth

from watching the events unfold in a collegial space. You don't know what you'll get: either real people staving away real violence from the purported safety of a rooftop or flitting images of colorful playthings. Either an outdated weather report or an image of a military strike sitting side-by-side a pastel illustration of a swan swaddling a lake. The transitions are dizzying, an uncomfortable reminder of the temporal lag between the images' capture and their presentation.



Banu Cennetoğlu, *1 January 1970 – 21 March 2018 · H O W B E I T · Guilty feet have got no rhythm · Keçiboynuzu · AS IS · MurMur · I measure every grief I meet · Taq u Raq · A piercing Comfort it affords · Stitch · Made in Fall · Yes. But. We had a golden heart. · One day soon I'm gonna tell the moon about the crying game*, 2018, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2019. Video, images, sound; 22 parts, 46,685 files. 128 hours and 22 minutes. Metadata: 687 pages, 11.7 x 16.5 inches (279 mm x 432 mm). Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Courtesy the artist and Rodeo, London/Piraeus. Photo: Kyle Knodell

Through this contradictory valence of images, what comes into view is images and their mediation. Sight is attached and reattached by proxy. Horror becomes invisible enough to make its counterpart visible. Advertisements that digital-era eyes are trained to glaze over suddenly appear as monoliths. Equivocation is set up by the terms of engagement, in the unsuspecting time of infinitely different viewing experiences. It is for these reasons that it is not magnitude on display, but the chance encounter.

This is a familiar mechanism. With the advent of targeted advertising, it is becoming easier to accidentally censor what information comes in and what information stays out. The algorithmic choreography of targeted advertising and Google-backed surveillance renders the space of viewing quantifiable. Neuromarketing claims to understand its users through (nonconsensually obtained) data, which poses the risk of discrimination, stigmatization, and coercion. And just this past year, AI proved its capacity to auto-generate a convincing stream of fake news, suggesting the ubiquity of misinformation to come. The superficially coherent image-stream of *Guilty feet have got no rhythm* (2018) mimics the discriminatory mechanism of targeted advertising, only in reverse. Cennetoğlu's work is not concerned with the free flow of information, but in the capacity for violence hidden in the attention span of contemporary constituents. Because the works operate squarely within the realm of art, the awkward voyeurism is theoretically easier to brush off. It is an uncomfortable reminder of the training in spectatorial passivity undergone in the digital-era.

Another work in the exhibition, *What is it that you are worried about?* (2014), further allegorizes this spectatorial encounter. Staged between the newspaper reading room and the monolithic archive, the eponymous *What is it that you are worried about?* is etched onto a mirror confronting the viewer. The work divides the two rooms and is thus impossible to avoid, ensuring its question is posed multilaterally. It mirrors the unending image-stream of *A piercing Comfort it affords* back to the viewer, whose own reflection sits side-by-side Cennetoğlu's moving image repository. The mirror ensures that the digital stockpile is inescapable, trapped by an act of exhibitionism on the part of the viewer. Like the unsolicited and algorithmic mechanisms by which content reaches us, *What is it that you are worried about?* Draws attention to the pleasure of watching someone else's life unfold in the same space as a body doing the consuming. The data cannot be escaped—it hits you on all sides, in front and behind, in sight of your own avatar.



Installation view, Banu Cennetoğlu, SculptureCenter, New York, 2019. Photo: Kyle Knodell

Art historian Julian Stallabrass coined the term “data sublime” to describe the subjects of contemporary art which take data as their aesthetic linchpin. Typically manifested as large-scale displays of data, the data sublime has the power to elicit fear of data itself by denying the conceptual tools required to make sense of it.^[1]

Stallabrass contends that, “The sublime is often used for conservative purposes: to frame or manage a common social fear (of the masses, quite often, but also more recently of data itself) and offer it up for consumption.” In Cennetoğlu's case, data is presented as a mechanism which indexes the wide swath of feeling-states a singular life is privy to: pain, hostility, comeuppance, indifference, triumph, birth. There is no easy way into the abyss—what you see is what you get. And what you get, from reading room to large-scale installation, is a transmission model for speaking in the void.

In providing the viewer with a spectacle of data—chaotically complex, immense in scope—Cennetoğlu exploits the notion that putting data on display, no matter how pure and guileless, is the same as indexing truth. Because there is far too much material to make sense of, a reader is left to decipher the repository on their terms and without guidance. But all those featured in *1 January 1970 – 21 March 2018*—her friends, her daughter, the curators and museum directors involved—are visualized through Cennetoğlu's oeuvre, flattening the looking into

one of bias. One wonders what that means for the subjects involved, whose ability to act as free-form social agents is superseded by their presentation as raw material for viewer interpretation. Like the feeling of scrolling through endless streams of online spectacle, indifference is born out of abundance. At risk here is the preservation of passivity, severing the connection between images and their veracity.

All digital media is indexical, if we bear in mind what level of materiality they are indexing.[2] From the imperfect flow of electrons to the social networks in which they exist, digital media cannot hide or transpose the mechanisms that constitute them. In Cennetoğlu case, indexicality is an unabashed window into subjectivity—*her* subjectivity. It is access to emotional rhythms eking out of still images; flashes of a banal and intimate private life; the imprint of loss on the surface; an unruly tangle of montage. Distanced from the fantasy of capturing truth, Cennetoğlu's indexicality itself indexes the collapse of objectivity. It is as though the moving images—diegetic in their presentation—slink into the newfangled territory of the non-diegetic. They are the fabricated debris of images occurring outside of the story-world, a soundtrack the protagonists are oblivious to.

The real draw of the exhibition is the idea that raw data can even be made to be “on view.” The disjunction between, on the one hand, material that suggests Banu is a cultural producer and, on the other, rioting and violence, thematizes the mechanisms of abstraction that “truth” is subject to. Metadata can be made of the chaos of life. Pain is an ingredient of statistical measure. A psychedelic juxtaposition can be more real because it *feels* more real. An intimate encounter with the artist's daughter or the blase and self-reflexive conversations with curators responsible for exhibition's fruition: a mimicry of the harder-to-parse mechanisms of life that do not easily parlay into algorithm, and which cannot easily be measured. It's a disorienting view into the register of reverse-surveillance, where time capsules offer data without interpretation. But as with surveillance, the vibrating danger of material to be used against you still hangs in the air. Trust becomes a factor inherent in the interface with material.



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In this way, the works on display each have an air of speculative realism, where non-representation becomes their representational mode. The newspaper project literally condenses a day into a bound volume, whereas *A piercing Comfort it affords* surveys years in the life of Cennetoğlu. Dictated by a politics of production, the particular abstraction on view veers into whimsical territory. Because the material is presented in the realm of art and under the umbrella of an institution, the ‘raw’ data reads closer to a manipulated image than to evidence or document. I wonder where this self-presentation makes room for self-criticality.

It is precisely the collapse of artist, institution, and archive which puts into view not only the futility of ‘total’ information, but the danger of its fruition. Cennetoğlu sets up material inundation purposefully, in order to address the deeper structural concerns regarding the sanctity of information and the proliferation of images. But this also sets up the possibility for a violent and indifferent viewing experience, where reflecting on ‘pure’ metadata comes with the possibility of complacency or, worse yet, equivocation. Hal Foster has argued that even critical ethnographic projects can stray “from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a decentering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise.”^[3] Though the exhibition has less to do with Cennetoğlu than with the general lack of safeguards against the sanctity of truth, we nonetheless have a responsibility to be aware of a shift into sublime. Otherwise, a trap: the inscrutability leaves a viewer to stitch their own story, whether or not they have the tools to decipher it.

Author’s Note: Banu Cennetoğlu’s solo exhibition was on view at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York, from January 14 to March 25, 2019.

[1] Julian Stallabrass, “Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen”, *October* 138, 2011, 3.

[2] Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 190.

[3] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Boston, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.